

Jim Gill

World Communion Sunday

October 1, 2017

"Intentions"

Exodus 17:1-7 Matthew 21:23-32 Philippians 2:6-10

INTRODUCTION TO EXODUS 17:1-7 Moses was having a rough time in his new flock. When he was a shepherd of sheep the sheep went where he told them and didn't complain. The people he was shepherding out of Egypt were quite different. They' complained about the lack of food and God provided quail at night and manna in the morning. This week we look at the fact that water is becoming scarce. Hear the word of God from Exodus 17:1-7.

INTRODUCTION TO MATTHEW 21:23-32 The religious "powers that be" were used to being treated as such. But there was a new teacher in town, a teacher who was threatening their authority. They feared Jesus' popularity. In their eyes, Jesus was preaching heresy and leading people away from the religious traditions that it was their job to defend. They questioned his authority. To illustrate his credentials and to call into question their authority Jesus asked them a question. Because they won't answer his question he won't answer theirs. . Hear the word of God from Matthew 21:23-32

Let us pray. Lord thank you for this your word. We pray that it may become a special word to each of us. As we meditate on what it has to say to us, may the words of my mouth, the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, o Lord our rock and our redeemer.

They say the road to hell is paved with good(intentions.)

Rabbi Harold Kushner tells a wonderful story about a bright young man, who was a sophomore Stanford pre-med student. To reward him for having done so well in school, his parents gave him a trip to the Far East for the summer vacation before the start of his junior year. While there he met a guru who said to him, "Don't you see how you are poisoning your soul with this success oriented way of life? Your idea of happiness is to stay up all night studying for an exam so you can get a better grade than your best friend. Your idea of a good marriage is not to find the woman who will make you whole, but to win the girl that everyone else wants. That's not how people are supposed to live. Give it up; come join us in an atmosphere where we all share and love each other."

The young man had completed four years at a competitive high school to get into Stanford, plus two years of pre-med courses at the university. He was ripe for this sort of approach. He called his parents and told them he would not be coming home. He was dropping out of school to live in an ashram (a spiritual retreat).

"Six months later, his parents got a letter from him: "Dear Mom and Dad, I know you weren't happy with the decision I made last summer, but I want to tell you

how happy it has made me. For the first time in my life, I am at peace. Here there is no competing, no hustling, and no trying to get ahead of anyone else. Here we are all equal, and we all share. This way of life is so much in harmony with the inner essence of my soul that in only six months I've become the number two disciple in the entire ashram, and I think I can be number one by June!" 1.

In Jesus' parable, the first son had good intentions. He didn't rebel when his father asked him to work in the field. He didn't talk back to him. He said all the right stuff. But good intentions are not enough. Actions speak louder ...than intentions.

Jesus doesn't give an explanation as to why the second son never got to his chores. Jesus lets us fill in that blank. It very easily could have been that he was a strong believer in the other doctrine that Presbyterians are famous for—the doctrine of procrastination.

The end of Jesus' parable gives us a clue as to who Jesus is thinking of when he talks about the second son. Jesus is thinking of the religious leaders who have said, "Yes" to the Lord when it comes to caring for others and ministering to others and either something better came along or it became too arduous to care for others and they didn't follow through.

The first son however, did work in the vineyard. That's really surprising. After all, at first he rebelled. Today he might have said something like, "No, Dad, my friends are coming over and we're going to the lake. But a funny thing happened. He changed his mind and went.

According to Jesus' explanation at the end of the parable, this son represents those who have been far away from the Lord, who haven't even bothered to give lip service to God. These are the outcasts, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the untouchables who have said, "No" to God's call to follow. And..yet....in the end they wind up going to work in the Lord's vineyard.

Mike Rowe has made a career out of doing disgusting stuff. As the host of the Discovery Channel series "Dirty Jobs," Rowe has mucked-out, dug under, flushed, slogged, and slid through some of the most filthy and foul places on the planet. Some of you have been busy doing some of those things recently.

But whether he has been hanging from rafters or slipping through sewers, Rowe has consistently shown his viewers how even the most grungy, grimy, gross job still has its own dirty dignity. Rowe always offers respect to those who are "showing him the ropes," whether they are demonstrating how to scrape up penguin poop or harvest worms. The underlying message of "Dirty Jobs" is that no matter how nasty, a job is a job and doing it well gives a sense of well-being and worth to humanity.

In Jesus' day some jobs were thought too dirty to be redeemed. Jesus honed in

on the performers of these most despicable jobs throughout his ministry. Jesus spoke with and reached out to exactly those who were supposed to be shunted off and shoved aside for the unredeemable "dirty jobs." Jesus touched and healed the untouchable and unhealable — lepers, Gentiles, Roman oppressors. Jesus comforted a Roman centurion grieving for his daughter. Jesus extended his hand to those out of their minds.

But perhaps the most wretched refuse Jesus consoled and companioned were the tax collectors and prostitutes. Neither disease, nor demons, nor DNA made these people outcasts. They had professions that they knew would make them outcasts among their own people and despised by the people they served.

In Jesus' day both tax collectors and prostitutes were viewed as "collaborators." They profited from the despised existence and detested ruling authority of the Roman Empire.

Tax collectors brought the reality of Roman rule into the pocket of every Jewish citizen. Every action taken, every aspect of life was scrutinized and taxed by the Roman authorities. Every shekel paid was a cruel reminder of Israel's defeat, of the loss of identity and the fear of no future that haunted the "chosen people" of God. Every time the tax collector dumped coins into Rome's coffers, Israel's hopes became emptier.

Prostitutes violated their own sexual purity, to be sure. But their existence also threatened the purity of Israel itself. According to Mosaic Law, any child born of a Jewish mother was considered Jewish. But what happens when the "chosen people" are being created by Roman soldiers?

The tax collectors were instruments used against Israel's political identity. The prostitutes were instruments used against Israel's genetic identity. Yet it is precisely these two groups, one the most dangerous and the other the most despicable, that Jesus singled out for commendation. Jesus is saying that you cannot discount whole categories of people out of hand--especially since many are forced into these professions.

Jesus is talking about tax collectors like Zacchaeus. Jesus invited himself to his home and before Zacchaeus could take Jesus home for dinner agreed to pay back everyone he defrauded.

Jesus is talking about prostitutes like Mary Magdalene who followed Jesus and who poured expensive perfume to anoint him for his burial and was one of the first witnesses of the resurrection.

Jesus is not encouraging prostitution or recommending it. He is warning against writing off people because of where they find themselves in life. No one is too far gone to come home.

Jim Rigby was a seminary classmate. When he graduated from seminary he was called to serve the church that I was attending when Anne and I met. He is still the pastor of that church in Austin, St. Andrew's Presbyterian. He writes almost every day on Facebook. Last week he wrote this,

"A lot of Christians say that the God of the Hebrew Scriptures was cruel, whereas the God of the Christian scriptures is loving. I don't believe that observation is really very fair or even accurate.

Let me first say that I hope the early Christian teachers were not using hell to frighten people, but reassuring people who already believed in it. I hope they were telling people already terrified of hell that there was a way out of what they feared. My hope is that hell was a symbol of whatever we fear, not an actual place to be feared.

In any case, we must be very honest that there is nothing in Hebrew scripture rivaling the cruelty of those Christian theologians who threaten sinners with an eternal, hopeless and heartless torture." 2

Hell is not a destination anyone is going to. Hell is where we are coming out of because of Jesus. Jesus descended into hell to live among us to lead us out of it. Jesus took on the dirty job of being Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus came to do that Emmanuel labor of leading us out of hell, out of separation from God, out of separation from each other. He took the Whole World in his hands when he died on the cross and rose from the grave and ascended into heaven taking us with him.

Jesus said to Peter, "On the rock of your confession that I am Lord I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. The churches job is to kick down those gates and bring people out of hell not consign them or threaten them with going there.

Try telling the people who have lost everything in the hurricanes in Texas and Louisiana and the Islands hit by Hurricane Maria they are not in hell now. Try telling those digging through the earthquake rubble in Mexico that they are not in hell now. Try telling the people in Bangla Desh and in Syria and Iraq and Afghanistan and North Korea they are not in hell now.

Jesus is saying to these religious leaders and to tax collectors and prostitutes that the road OUT of hell is paved with good intentions followed through by actions that speak louder.... The first son's actions spoke louder that the second son's words.

Tony Campolo tells the story of the "reject prom." It all began when John Carlson, a Lutheran Minister in Minnesota, believed that senior proms excluded

many young adults. It had become an elitist affair for the popular and wealthy. The losers and less fortunate youth stayed away. Carlson planned a party for all those who didn't have a date or couldn't afford to go to the prom. He called it the "Reject Prom." It was such a great time the youth wanted it repeated the following year. Thus the "reject prom" became a local tradition. In a matter of time the popularity of the "reject prom" exceeded the high school prom, which by comparison was very boring. Carlson's cornerstone faith made a huge difference in the lives of these youth. His "love ethic" helped them to overcome their rejection. 3 Carlson provided a way out of the hell of separation and rejection.

The Pharisees wanted a kingdom that was reserved for themselves and their kind only. Jesus wanted a kingdom that was big enough for everybody and anybody who was willing to DENY themselves, take up their cross and follow him. Jesus' vision was for far more than Israeli Communion Sunday....he envisioned WORLD COMMUNION SUNDAY! Paul's letter to the Philippians envisioned the day when every knee would bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord.

The Jews were the first to hear God's message of covenant and promise of salvation. They were the first to be called, to be rescued, to be delivered from slavery, to be fed quail and manna and water from a rock. The Gentiles, yes even those colluding with them like prostitutes and tax collectors came late to hearing the message. Jesus says that the last would be first and the first would be last, but my hope is that the last AND the first will be there. Notice Jesus didn't say the leaders wouldn't go, they just wouldn't be ahead of those who responded as opposed to those who had yet to respond.

If you and I are going to be all that God has called us to be, and if we are to be used by God to see to it that many more find the road OUT of hell we are going to need to follow through. We will need to have more than good intentions. We will need to answer our God's call to go with a yes AND answer by actually going! We need to do more than keep our options open. We will need to narrow our options and limit our choices. Given a choice between being like those who say they will and don'tand those who say they won't and then do, I want to be like the latter. Or better yet, my goal is to be like a third son who says he will and does! I want to Trust AND Obey. I want to choose my road out of hell and all that frightens me. For me, that road is paved with so much more than good intentions. That road is paved by living up to and fulfilling ...God's ... intentions.

Let's pray, Dear Lord, we thank you giving us the privilege of serving in your vineyard. May we say, "Yes" AND follow through. May we TRUST AND OBEY! May we not be jealous or envious of who is number one by June, of who gets there first, but be grateful for those who get there by grace through faith. May our efforts in your vineyard produce much fruit, and may many more come to know your marvelous love and incredible peace and effervescent joy. May we do so, humbled by the example of Your Son Jesus Christ, who has shared these

insights through this parable this morning, who longs for all to come to him and calls us to join with him in partnership to share God's love. May your Holy Spirit empower us to be your witnesses both here and throughout the Whole World.

1 ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc. by Mickey Anders

2. Rev. Jim Rigby, Pastor St. Andrew's Presbyterian Austin, Texas

3. Cornerstone Faith, by Keith Wagner